

## ANNIE V. DHONDT MEMORIAL VOLUME — INTRODUCTION

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When asked to write some introductory words to the present volume, I agreed without hesitation, because this would give me the opportunity to reflect upon personal matters. But first I phoned my colleagues in Moscow and St Petersburg and all of them immediately accepted my invitation to send me their recollections, which would then be incorporated into this introduction. Her Russian friends remember the various sides to Annie's personality and put something to paper; we all express the hope that these personal reflections may be of interest to all who knew and liked Annie, yet probably had no idea about her 'Russian life'. For an overview of Annie's activities, which were not related to Russia and her Russian colleagues, reference is made to previously published obituaries (KENNEDY, 2006; JAGT, 2006; NOLF, 2007).

I decided to start with part of the text of an obituary, published recently in both the Russian and English editions of *Paleontologicheskii Zhurnal/Paleontological Journal* (ALEKSEEV *et al.*, 2008), in which a group of Russian scientists highlighted Annie's work in Russia and former Soviet republics and recalled her sincere friendship and big heart. This excerpt is here reproduced with the authors' permission: 'Annie Dhondt visited the USSR for the first time in the winter of 1980-1981, when only a few European scientists were prepared to visit the 'Evil Empire'. She pursued her studies at the institutions of Moscow, Leningrad, Novosibirsk, Lviv, and Tbilisi. In collaboration with V.A. Zakharov she studied collections of Jurassic and Cretaceous bivalve mollusks from extreme northern

regions of Siberia in the Institute of Geology and Geophysics, Siberian Division, Academy of Sciences of the USSR (Novosibirsk), she also spent one month working with D.P. Naidin at the Geological Faculty, Moscow State University. After these trips she never lost her contacts with Soviet and Russian paleontologists. In the 1990s, years critical for Russian science, she was closely concerned with these difficulties; thus, in 1994 she organized and headed INTAS project 94-1414 'Bioevents at the Cretaceous-Paleogene boundary on the southern margin of the 'Sea of White Chalk': paleobiology, paleobiogeography, sequence stratigraphy, geochemistry, and geochronology'. This project provided financial support for many Russian students of the Cretaceous, and in 1995 many of them (D.P. Naidin, A.A. Atabekyan, V.N. Beniamovski, V.A. Zakharov, L.F. Kopaevich, E.V. Kotetishvili, V.I. Zhelezko, and A.S. Alekseev) were able to visit the type sections of the Upper Cretaceous of Belgium and The Netherlands (including the stratotype of the Maastrichtian Stage). After this INTAS project was completed, Annie Dhondt obtained financial support for a new project (1998) concerning the biostratigraphy and tectonics of the western and central margins of the Peri-Tethys. This project was carried out by members of the Institut Royal des Sciences Naturelles de Belgique and the Chair of Regional Geology and History of the Earth, Moscow State University, and two postgraduate students (R.R. Gabdullin and T.A. Kuz'micheva) took full advantage of the latest research facilities during their scientific missions in Belgium, and thus were able to produce important scientific results. [...]

Long before her first trip to the USSR, Annie Dhondt, [...] showed great interest in our country. For several years she attended courses on Russian language at the Soviet Embassy in Brussels. Her frequent and occasionally fairly extended study tours to the USSR and Russia helped her to improve her Russian to the

point that, in the later years of her life, Annie Dhondt could discuss any topic in Russian without difficulty. [...]

After her first visit to the Crimea in 1996 and to the Crimean research training base of the Geological Faculty of the Moscow State University (better known as 'Polygon'), she enjoyed this splendid corner of the Black Sea region to such an extent that she spent her one-month vacations there almost every year. However, she was too active a personality to restrict herself to mere observation of life on Polygon. She found pleasure in working at the museum in Polygon, in helping students to identify fossils that they had collected, and in teaching them the elements of paleontology, systematics, and nomenclature. Besides teaching students, she taught English and French to the children of teachers and faculty members. Both students and children liked her, and expressed gratitude to 'Anna Ivanovna', as they called her'.

In addition to the above, Tamara N. Bogdanova (St Petersburg) sent me the following personal note on Annie: 'I met Annie Dhondt in 1982. She came to Leningrad to look at some collections of Cretaceous bivalves at CNIIGR Museum (VSEGEI). She also wished to see my collections of Early Cretaceous bivalves from Central Asia and A.A. Atabekian's collections of Upper Cretaceous material. Annie liked our museum; in particular, she had a high opinion of the organisation of work at the museum. At that time, Tatjana M. Malchevskaya was the curator of Mesozoic collections. I remember that Annie marvelled at the fact that for Tatjana it was enough to hear the name of the palaeontologist whose collection she wished to see, and a minute later that collection landed on her table together with the monograph or paper in which that collection had been described. Annie was really impressed by our collections and could not stop working on them during a few days. At that time, our Cretaceous group was comparatively large and included specialists of different faunal groups: I studied ammonites and bivalves from the Lower Cretaceous, S.V. Lobacheva specialized in Early Cretaceous echinoids and brachiopods, A.A. Atabekian studied Late Cretaceous ammonites, M.V. Titova Late Cretaceous brachiopods and T.D. Zonova Cretaceous inoceramids. All of us met Annie for the first time and tried to talk with her. Some of us used English for that, others tried to speak German or French. But for Annie that was not a problem at all - she conversed with us in English, German, French and sometimes even a bit of Russian. Later, Annie followed Russian language courses and was very successful. During the last eight

to nine years she called me by telephone quite often and we spoke Russian. After 1982, we kept in touch and exchanged papers - I received from her important papers on pectinids, which were very helpful in my own work. However, at times we found ourselves in scientific debate; Annie belonged to that group of specialists who interpret species very widely. For example, we had heated discussions over many years and could not find agreement over the fact whether *Neithea neocomiensis* and *Neithea atava* were distinct species (my opinion) or whether the former represented a younger stage of the latter (Annie's view).

Apart of joint scientific interests, we wrote each other just about our family problems; Annie visited my home and knew my relatives. However, only in 1995 did we meet again, in Brussels, for the Second International Symposium on Cretaceous Stage Boundaries. It was perfectly organised by Annie, and a great success. Decisions reached during this symposium were published in 1996, and remain useful, and some even actual to this day.

Our people say: 'God's ways are not known!'. Near the end of the 1980s, Fabrizio Cecca worked in Turkmenia, Tuarkyr, collecting ammonites and bivalves. Ammonites were identified by himself but bivalves he transferred to Annie for a future joint publication. Before that I worked at the same sections during seven years together with lithostratigrapher E.Y. Yakhnin. Annie took Fabrizio Cecca to Leiden, where I worked in 1999 at the Museum of Natural History and all of us, together, prepared that paper.

In 2000, we met again at MGU (Moscow State University) during the 1st Conference on the Cretaceous System in Russia. Annie gave a talk on the distribution of Late Cretaceous bivalves across the world, in Russian. She knew that I.A. Mikhailova and myself were going to publish a paper on a general analysis of Aptian faunas from the Volga, North Caucasus and Caspian regions. Annie well understood the value of that material for European geologists and kindly invited us to publish in the *Bulletin de l'Institut royal des Sciences naturelles de Belgique, Sciences de la Terre*. Annie was the editor-in-chief of this journal and her work on our text was extremely precise. First of all, she changed our 'Russian English', then, she carefully corrected the style of the text, rendering palaeontological facts clear and logical. She also helped us after the reviews came in. By the way, even reviewers were chosen by her absolutely right: Raymond Casey, specialist on the Aptian of England, and Fabrizio Cecca. Annie stressed that all remarks made by reviewers needed to be countered. We worked with Annie almost a year and learnt a lot from

her; a precise, extremely strong but at the same time very fair and kind editor.

After that we were going to meet in Paris in 2002 to visit the stratotype section of the lower Aptian near Marseille. Annie promised to show us 'her' Paris, which she liked very much. However, that year it was extremely hot in southeast France; there were a lot of forest fires and we decided to postpone our visit. Unfortunately, that was the last time we met ..... Annie's illness progressed too quickly. Her last telephone call was half of a year before her death. In spite of her problems, she sounded as always, laughing, full of plans, lots of work to be done ... The memory of that perfect person will always be with anyone who knew her.'

The next personal note is by Svetlana V. Lobacheva (St Petersburg), who writes, 'Annie Dhondt – for us just Annie – colleague and very close friend. We first met in 1982, like many of us at VSEGEI who at that time worked on Cretaceous faunas. We studied different faunal groups, but, in spite of that, we held the same views on different questions in palaeontology and stratigraphy, perfectly understood one another, even where it concerned some usual human problems. I was impressed by her responsibility to work, especially her decision to see as many collections as possible in the various palaeontological museums of the world. During her visit to Leningrad she already spoke Russian. Annie told us about her numerous travels to different countries and visits to palaeontological museums. As a rule, she tried to come to the country already with a knowledge of the native language, because apart of collections she wished to meet new people, understand them and provide conversations with them. Many times she told me how important it was to learn foreign languages.

Annie was a person of a high social standard and sincerity; she could very quickly find a joint language with all of her colleagues and always was ready to help if difficulties arose. She kindly cared about all of her Russian colleagues and to us was '*our kind angel*'. However, Annie always held a personal opinion on everything and invariably strongly discussed any problematic moments. Moreover, she could 'feel' people and, without any mistakes, provide a 'diagnosis' ..... In spite of the fact that I met Annie comparatively rarely, I always experienced her kindness and warmth; this has now disappeared – a great loss to us all'.

Following these views, I feel that I have not much to add, apart from recollections on my own encounters with Annie. We first met in 1995, at the Second International Symposium on Cretaceous Stage Boundaries (Brussels).

Before meeting her in person, I had heard about her from many of my Russian colleagues. My aunt, Tatiana D. Zonova, held her works on bivalves in high esteem. Ludmila Kopaevich and Tamara Bogdanova told me about her great sense of humour and kind relationships with Russian scientists, but also about her – at times – negative views which could finish off a person. Later, during another symposium, at Vienna (Fig. 1), I witnessed just such a case – highly impressive, but I counted myself lucky not to be in that person's place. But this happened later; in 1995, we were just deeply appreciative to Annie. It was a really historical moment for us, Russian scientists and scientists from other former Soviet republics. We were finally able to cross the 'iron curtain' and take part in a great international symposium. Everybody knew that Annie was the main organiser of that meeting, and thus everything went like clockwork – great organisation, and all attendees agreed. Tamara Bogdanova already mentioned this above. However, I do not think that everyone is fully aware of how much Annie Dhondt did for the Russian delegation which attended an international meeting for the first time, in such high numbers, and not only from Moscow and St Petersburg, but also from Saratov and Novosibirsk. That was a real 'Russian event'! I am sure that Annie did the same for other former Soviet colleagues but I can speak only for my colleagues and myself. When we were preparing our journey there were a lot of problems with invitations and visas, financial support, tickets etc. Some potential participants finally decided to refuse from travelling because all was extremely complicated and very expensive. Annie did everything to help us, inclusive of writing numerous invitations, dozens of telephone calls to Russian embassies in Belgium and France and even visits to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Belgium. She found possibilities to support most of her colleagues financially; moreover, some of them even obtained tickets that had been bought by the organising committee.

Annie was extremely busy during that symposium, but I had the possibility to value her sense of humour and her command of Russian. In addition, I was absolutely astonished to hear her speak perfect English, German and French.... Starting then, to me, Annie became more than just a colleague. Later, when we met again and again, my opinion of Annie got even better, scientifically, as well as personally – a good friend and unique person. I know that many Russian palaeontologists will subscribe to that opinion. To us she was much more than just a colleague...

John and I are very happy that, in spite of the awfully rapid progress of her illness, she was present at

our wedding reception at the Natuurhistorisch Museum Maastricht, nine months before her untimely death. We shall be remembering Annie, with love.

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Fig. 1 — During a break at the Sixth International Cretaceous Symposium, Vienna (2000). From left to right: Ludmila F. Kopaevich, Annie V. Dhondt, Herbert Summesberger, Larisa A. Doguzhaeva, Svetlana V. Lobacheva and Tamara N. Bogdanova (photograph by author).